

## Journal 35 - in Shadow

We fetched our gear from the hotel and got ready to depart. While Morianna booked us out of the hotel, I piled the choicest parts of my newest wardrobe into my saddlebags and headed downstairs to join Morianna and Victor. Then we took a taxi to the western extents of New Jersey and reclaimed our horses from the riding school where we had rented stalls for them for the week.

Then, once we were ready, we set out on the roads of Shadow once more.

Morianna and I came almost simultaneously on the same idea. Perhaps if we found somewhere more advanced than the world we were leaving, we could examine scientific works and the like to determine what that place considered to be on the technological and magical horizon, then travel to a Shadow where such goals had become reality. We could then repeat that cycle until we found some where capable of producing the sort of devices that were currently besieging Amber, and then seek out a group experienced in their removal.

We were almost ready to act upon that plan when I received a Trump contact. It was Random, our lord and king (not that I had actually sworn fealty or anything). He told me that they (namely Amber) had received a parcel: a supposedly real disarmed mine. He said that although it was probably a decoy meant to produce false leads, it still was of some use. It used no organic parts at all, relying entirely upon both technology and magic. Apparently, they propagated by converting the matter around themselves into other mines; they had begun to use this knowledge to slow the spread of the sneaky little buggers.

Before closing the contact he handed me a small book; he then waved and broke. The book was a novel, 'the newest in science fiction' apparently, and made of soft, rather flimsy paper.

The third leg of the journey was shorter, and the stranger variations we had seen the Shadows we passed through were not present this time. Instead we seemed to always stay just over the hill from various cities and towns, riding through valleys and along ridges. The people and vehicles we passed became slowly more advanced until we reached a place that was best described as twentieth century, about three hundred years after 'my' time, had it been the same world advanced forwards in time.

By then even Victor had read the novel Random had given me; I think Morianna had it at that moment.

We left our horses at another riding school, although this time they seemed rather surprised to see us ride in on them. Others who arrived with horses used 'horse boxes', essentially covered wagons large enough to bear a horse and towed by an automobile.

We used the school's telephone to call a taxi, and when it arrived we rode in it into the city and alighted outside their largest public library. Victor chose to look in the children's science section (complex science would be explained simply in those books), Morianna took herself to the newspaper section to get an idea of the public attitudes and knowledge of science and magic, while I sought out the 'popular science' section to get a clearer view of what the books Victor was reading were leaving out.

I was just reading a book that fantasised about tiny, magically powered machines smaller than a pinhead repairing the human body from within when a glaring incongruity caught my eye. A man, or I so assumed, dressed in clothing of the style of the Elizabethan era of England stood by one of the bookcases that lined the walls of the library. 'He' wore a long, hooded cloak and though I could not actually see his face I got the definite impression he was watching me and waiting for me to notice.

I turned to face him, and the mystery figure reached beneath his cloak and pulled out a small object that was unmistakably a Trump card. He held it up and then placed it on a shelf before walking rapidly down another aisle. I did not have the opportunity to see where he went, as I had to hurry to try and get to the Trump before anyone else did.

I was not successful, however. A local citizen got there first and after a brief examination was about to walk off with it when I reached him. I tried to convince him that he

had found my bookmark for me, but he had seen the cloaked man leave it there and was trying to return it to him.

In the end I had to resort to snatching it out of his grasp; it was potentially too important for me to lose it. The upstanding citizen seemed offended by my treatment of him and he attempted to take hold of me and regain the card. By this point I really had had enough; we did not have time for me to try and sweet-talk this fellow into giving me the Trump, so I took a firm hold of his wrist and applied a little pressure to it, while suggesting he give up on his charitable behaviour.

Not very charitable of me, of course, but Manteau was getting away and I really wanted to see if I could catch up with him.

Monsieur Charity cried out at the 'little pressure' I applied; I think I had forgotten my own newfound strength for a moment. He agreed to leave the matter be, but not before we had attracted some attention. I let him be and he all but ran off, nursing his probably sprained wrist. The bystanders looked rather disgustedly at me, but I paid them no mind as I went in search of my companions. Events like that always bring trouble, and besides, I had probably been handed a viable solution to the matter.

Or a trap.

I found Morianna in the news section, reading a particularly large paper. I told her that I had encountered a strange person who had left me a Trump card and the trouble I had acquiring it. I had barely finished in my accounting when we heard a quite high-pitched wailing sound coming closer and closer outside. By the way the other library users were reacting I guessed it signified the arrival of law enforcers of some variety.

Just then a group of perhaps a half dozen men in some sort of blue uniform and carrying black cudgels came running out of one of the staircases onto our floor. They stopped to look around and then one of them saw or, or rather me, no doubt. He was just in the process of pointing and calling out to his comrades when the whole group were dropped by our guardian angel, Victor.

He cheerfully lay into them, knocking them down and around with almost no effort; I think he had been looking forward to just such an opportunity for some exercise. The other people around screamed and ran away from him; Morianna looked slightly bemused while I feigned a certain degree of fear and 'bolted' for the nearest non-Victor-filled exit. Alas, there were none, and we were forced to watch as more watchmen arrived to take him on.

One at the back drew some form of weapon that had the look of a gun about it, and I was about to shout out to Victor when he span and held one of the other blue-shirts up before him like a shield. The shining lightning bolt that arced between weapon and man lit up the whole room, and the poor blue-shirt shook like he had been struck by lightning, which I suppose he had.

By this time Victor had had enough. He did not like such weapons anyway, so he decided to beat a hasty retreat. Rather too hasty as it turned out; he smashed his way through the outer wall of the library to escape only to find himself at least three stories up. He was never one for much forethought.

The remaining (surviving?) blue-shirts, once they had recovered from their shock at seeing a man punch his way through a solid wall (I know it surprised me), began to gather up their defeated comrades and direct people to leave the building. I think they were so caught up with tidying up in Victor's wake that they did not see the two of us leaving by the back stairs.

Miraculously we caught up with Victor as he struggled to limp away as fast as he could. The watch, perhaps wisely, had not yet attempted to rally themselves and go after him, so the two of us both put one of his arms around a shoulder and I led us a short way into Shadow, just a side-step really. A few more minor shifts later and we were at a hospital.

The emergency doctor told us our friend had a dislocated ankle; not bad for someone who had jumped from the third storey. They had given him some painkilling drugs and were surprised at the quantity they had been required to give him; at least three times the normal dose. They were naturally surprised, but we gave them no answers they were satisfied with.

I got the impression that Morianna would have willingly left our gear and horses behind had I not wished to have mine back for myself at least. She, of course, was still carrying that bag which seems to go with her everywhere and contains everything she seems to need. While I can and have lived out of a bag like that myself, I do prefer not to if I can

help it. There was the danger of arrest if the blue-shirts had located our horses; I did not know how likely that would be, being totally unfamiliar with the world in question.

I convinced her to come with me in case we needed her excellent disguise ability, but it proved unnecessary; our steeds had not been found and we collected them with no trouble at all.

Upon our return to the hospital we found that Victor was no longer in his room; no doubt feeling much better than they had expected he had gone to the canteen, a move which I suppose was inevitable.

I left Morianna in charge of the horses and sought him out. He was on what looked like his third tray of food and I joined him at his table. He asked what the trouble had been about and I told him about Monsieur Manteau and the Trump card. He asked to see it, and, realising I had not taken the opportunity to examine it yet, pulled it out of my jacket.

It was not much to look at; it depicted a simple brick wall beside what looked to be a section of road. The roadside was grassy.

We discussed whether or not to use it one way or the other to joining Morianna, and the three of us eventually decided to do so; Victor and I would go through first, and Morianna would look after the horses and our gear and Trump us after a short interval.

The brief prismatic flicker parted to reveal the grounds of a large mansion. It was three stories tall and quite solid and sturdy looking, but it seemed too clean. It was as if it was not a real mansion that people lived in, and it did not look as if it was quite in the right place. This intuition was confirmed when we saw the large automobile nearby, standing further down the road the Trump had delivered us onto.

It was a large and rather ornate affair, and looked to be a passenger vehicle of some sort. A number of people were queued up beside it and were slowly filing onto the vehicle while two gentlemen were placing what must have been their luggage in a kind of large cupboard set in the side of the vehicle, seemingly below the seats within.

No sooner had that revealed something of the place we were in than two flyers passed overhead. One could guess that the world we had arrived in was quite advanced; logically then, one could consider it likely that we could find what we sought in that place. That theory was given further substance by the sight of a strange, translucent shape water the plants. It appeared to be made of water, or at least water vapour; a creation of magic, so now we almost certainly had both magic and technology.

Monsieur Manteau had done us a service, it seemed.

We decided the place was safe, and when Morianna Trumped Victor he pulled her and our horses though.

By the look of the people, the way they were dressed and the attendants that fluttered about them, the mansion appeared to be not a home but a kind of memorial sight, a place where people could see what it was like in the past. A museum of sorts.

We needed to get to a city somehow, we decided. The best method, it seemed, was to take that coach that was so standing so invitingly nearby. I however, was loath to leave all my belongings behind, especially my horse; I had become quite attached to him, even if I could get another thousand like him in Shadow any time I wanted.

Eventually, rather sullenly really, I succumbed to real life and pulled my pack and panniers off of my poor, deserted horse and let him run free with his two fellows around the grounds of the mansion. I then carried my impromptu luggage over to the 'coach'.

The driver balked at the sight of my luggage but a surprise and rather unsubtle bribe from Victor convinced him all would be well to store it with the other luggage. Then we climbed aboard, taking the last few seats and receiving a few confused looks from the other passengers, and the coach started off back to the city.

The journey lasted an hour or three and was ultimately completely boring. We got to see a few of the sights though, and we got a good idea of what sort of place we had found ourselves in. When we stopped Victor spoke to the driver while I collected my precious luggage; whatever it was he said to him, he did not take it well, driving off in a hasty and rather irritable mood. Victor just shrugged.

Presumably acting on directions from the driver Victor led us to a small and barely suitable hotel. We booked rooms and relaxed in the bar for the rest of the evening to prepare for the long day's work ahead.

The next morning we discussed options over a hearty breakfast. Victor was all for joining the military, possibly the engineers; where better to determine if their military technology was of the level we desired? I was against this idea from the start; while it could give us something of what we wanted, it could well take several more years longer than any other technique. We argued over the matter for some time before Morianna announced she had had enough and went in search of a library. This greatly strengthened my argument and eventually Victor conceded.

The two of us went out for a walk to have a look at the city. A newspaper we found told us we were in Houston, a city in the south of this world's United States, on the north coast of the Gulf of Mexico. By inspecting the city, its inhabitants and their lifestyle we were able to determine that the technology level was quite high in many respects, and that while the magic level was similarly strong it was not widely practised; practitioners were not actually rare, they were just not common and always well looked after by sponsors (or caretakers and guards, maybe).

Then we sought out a library, ensuring that they employed no burly or armed guards beforehand. Victor went to look in the popular science section while I did most of my work in the military science section. I had just begun to trawl through a massive book detailing "military engineering technology and passive defensive systems" when Victor came up behind me and took hold of my arm in a rather peremptory fashion.

All became clear, however, when the image of Intruder swam into view before us. Victor had called him, he said, and that he was to provide us with technical material about the mines in what he called 'the local paradigm.' I handed him a few of the meatier (more complicated) manuals and guides and he told us he would contact us again soon once he converted their information into the local language.

I returned to my reading for a few minutes before being interrupted by Victor again; he handed me some rolls of paper and something like paper but slippery that were still fairly freshly shimmering from coming through a Trump contact. I took a quick look at them and they looked very similar to blueprints I had seen in the books before me.

I had to think a while before a reasonable plan presented itself to me. To be completely truthful, I had no idea exactly how to proceed at that point. Most of the ideas I came up with tended to put us into conflict with the authorities, martial or secular. Eventually, after some inspiration from taking a closer look at who made the equipment I had been reading about, it seemed like the best course of action to approach one of the ordnance manufacturers to see if they could help with a (mostly) imaginary mine threat our 'nation' was troubled by.

With this in mind I perused the lists of ordnance companies to find the best. 'The best', it turned out, was an ambiguous term at the very best of times, so we settled for the most successful in terms of contracts and profit (public profit, at least). This turned out to be a Japanese corporation by the peculiar name of TOSH. I presumed it was some form of acronym, but there was no mention of what it meant.

Then we settled on a plan of action. We would approach said company as representatives of an anonymous client, putting forward our problem in the hope that they could help us. I would be the primary representative, while Morianna would be some sort of secretary; no doubt she would speak when she wished, which hopefully would not seem too out of place. Victor, of course, would be our escort and bodyguard; no other position really suited him.

We returned to our hotel and attempted to locate the local headquarters of the company, but maps of the city streets were unhelpful; there were a number of blank, unmarked spots on the map. When Morianna called a city information telephone number she was told essentially what area it was in but that the place itself was 'ex-directory', which meant its address and telephone number were not public information. That left us with the simple option of going to look for it.

We sought out a fine clothiers and set about buying ourselves a suitable set of business clothes. Suits were the thing, we were told, in muted colours, so we had an ordering and (for Victor) tailoring session that lasted almost three hours. While Morianna and I were able to have clothing that came 'off the peg' (generic style and sizes, in other words) and only a little modification if desired, Victor practically had to have three suits cut up and stitched into one big one. While only a slight exaggeration, it still took more than twice as long to deal with him as it did the two of us added together.

We took advantage of the extra time to purchase a number of peripheral items; watches, jewellery, briefcases and the like. We even bought a couple of long and thin bags (apparently for some form of sports equipment) for Victor to carry our swords in.

Suitably attired we made our way to the approximate region of Houston and tried our best to locate TOSH headquarters. Unfortunately, one tall shiny building looks much like another, and we walked in what felt like circles for an hour or more. We eventually had to resort to questioning some workmen who appeared to be burying an incoherent mass of thin cables in a hole by the side of the road. Their coats proclaimed they were working for 'Weaver Telecommunications'.

The lead worker could not tell us the location of the headquarters either; how anyone does business with that company was beyond me. However, we soon caught on to they way he was loudly protesting that he was not permitted to tell anyone, even for money, and a suitable bribe got us what we needed.

The three of us strode in to the reception area of one particularly glittering tower and approached the desk. I asked the woman there (a quite attractive lass) if it were possible to visit their research department. She asked why, I told her we wished to discuss a matter regarding ordnance. She asked after a name, and I gave my name as Montsorbier (my one time friend and then pursuer). She checked (presumably) some form of computer device before announcing that as we had no appointment we could not see them.

I asked if we could speak to someone else, a representative of the company perhaps. She checked her computer again, before bidding us to sit and wait. This we did, and after maybe a quarter hour we were approached by a rather unassuming sort of fellow in a restrained suit. He introduced himself merely as Bradley.

He asked us about the matter that had brought us to TOSH and so I told how our 'employers' had uncovered a problem in their territory regarding a form of adaptive, replicating mine. I deliberately kept 'our employers' anonymous, preferring to save the true nature of the destination of any technicians secret to the very last minute.

Bradley asked to see some information regarding these mines and I pulled out my briefcase what Intruder's accompanying note had described as the 'simplest and least revealing' of the blueprints. Mr Bradley examined the diagrams for a time before asking if he could take them to show to his researchers. I told him that we could not allow them to be taken out of our sight, so he went over to the girl at the desk and spoke briefly to her before returning to us.

A short time later, perhaps ten minutes, a middle-aged man in a long white coat, which he wore over a rather rumpled suit, came out of one of the lifts at the far end of the entrance hall and approached us. He was introduced to us as Doctor Nowak, one of their senior researchers. He eagerly took the blueprint off me when it was handed to him, and his bushy beard waggled and he enthused over the ingenuity of the design and scribbled notes on the diagrams with a stubby pencil.

When Nowak had finished praising the designers Bradley arranged a meeting the next morning, and gave us the use of a limousine back to our hotel.

The next day there were two scientists, Nowak and another gentleman with a wispy beard but otherwise the same who Bradley introduced to us as Stephens. Novak more closely examined one of the more advanced blueprints we gave him while Stephens seemed satisfied to watch, as did Bradley.

After perhaps an hour of this Stephens announced that they (TOSH) would be unable to do anything about the mines. He shrugged at my questions, saying only that disposal was not really their forte; design was what they did best. Novak rolled up the diagrams and then he and Stephens left.

Bradley remained behind and told us there was a semi-military group he knew of who at least partly specialised in such work; many of their engineers were trained for disposal work of the type we were suggesting. He said that he had been authorised to introduce us to them; he would arrange the flight there, tell them we were coming and provide us with a letter of introduction.

He left us in that small office for a little over a half hour before returning with the appropriate material. The flight was arranged for tomorrow at about midday, so we had the rest of the day and the next morning to prepare ourselves.

Once we had been driven back to the hotel we set about buying some more garments and the like before travelling. A large metallic suitcase apiece was filled with smart 'business wear' and a lot of accompanying accoutrements. The night was spent relaxing and with as little planning or actual thought as possible.

The flight was very enjoyable. The aeroplane we used was a 'Lear Jet', a small, two-engine jet with comfortable seating for about a dozen people. It had a small bar, a large television screen, a 'video' and some lovely and soft upholstery. The 'stewardess' was a pleasant if rather bland blonde girl who was adept at serving drinks and mixing 'cocktails' (drinks involving mixed spirits and fruit juices, given strange names). I was glad the flight lasted only a few hours, despite the marvellous view out the windows.

We landed on a rather rough-looking airstrip on a fairly small island in the Gulf of Mexico where the ordnance specialists were based. According to a report I had been given they were some sort of mercenary group who hired their services out to those who could afford them. They appeared not to have given up all their ethics in pursuit of money, however, carefully vetting their prospective employers before signing any agreements.

We were met by a uniformed fellow who introduced himself as General Jonathon Lang; I wondered if that was a real earned rank or an assumed one. He walked us across to a couple of 'jeeps' that were waiting for us, and I could see the place was very well defended. Tall wire fences encircled the base and tall wood and metal towers stood just inside them at regular intervals. They were manned by either two or three men, I could not tell which. The long barrels of some variety of weapon could be seen pointed towards the surrounding jungle.

The jeep ride to the main compound took about ten minutes, and we got a good view of the place on the way. A large number of buildings were clustered in groups in the centre of the compound, surrounded by an open space and the ever-present fences. Most of the buildings were long and low, made of wood, with a primarily A-frame structure. Most of the simple windows were open to cool the dwellings in the heat of the day. Most of the people we saw were in uniform, a mixed green and brown trousers and light shirt ensemble; the few others wore more regular clothing, like we had seen in Houston, only more appropriate for the conditions.

Some of the buildings were more robust looking, made of brick with solid doors. Obviously these were the places that needed greater strength and security than the dormitories.

We were given the use of a 'guest dormitory' at the far end of the compound; they were of better quality than the standard dormitories, we were told, and had separate rooms rather than one open space with bunks. They were quite agreeable, open to allow a flow of air to cool the place during the day, and had 'air conditioning' if we required it. There were small computers in every room, a television and a bar in the 'living room'.

We got ourselves comfortable over the next few days, as we had to wait for almost a week before we got our first meeting with a representative of the engineers. We spent our time taking a look around the compound (where we were allowed to go, anyway) and talking to everyone who felt like indulging in conversation. We even got to see a few of the people we had gone to see, though they were rather shut-lipped, preferring to wait for the interviews before discussing anything in particular detail.

On the fifth day after we arrived at the site we met a gentleman with whom our initial negotiations were to be made with. His name was Johnson, and he was the unit's financial advisor and chief negotiator. We gave him the story we had used so far, refusing to elaborate on who our 'employers' were and where they were as well. We told him (in general terms) about the mine problem and showed him our diagrams. He told us that, starting tomorrow, we could begin our interviews of the personnel, though any final deals on pay and the like would be made with him and General Lang.

I hinted at the possibility of some quite substantial 'health benefits' (I had been reading a book on business terminology), very long term ones; I was not asked to elaborate, fortunately. Revealing that anyone who took us up on the contract could possibly live for a few thousand years was not something I really wanted to try to explain to them. Especially when I did not exactly understand the matter myself.

Tomorrow, Johnson told us, the interviews could begin. We thanked him and retired to rest and prepare for the rest of the afternoon.

The next day I took the opportunity to advise Random of our current circumstances; while I told him that we had found a place with individuals suitable for our requirements I did not tell him how we came to find their world. I had decided to wait until I could give him a more face to face report.